

Job hunting post-recession

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Abstract: Those of us who graduated from college and graduate school during and after the recession faced a library job market that was wildly unbalanced in terms of supply and demand, and consequently had to find creative ways to find employment. This column offers the author's experience as one possible example for how new library school graduates can engage a variety of opportunities on their way to full-time employment.

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When I graduated from library school in 2013, I already had a master's in history and some eight years of paraprofessional library and archives experience. It took me two and a half years after graduation to find a full-time job.

For a variety of reasons, the supply-and-demand for library and information professionals is completely out of balance. Since starting college, my classmates and I were told that the job market would be particularly good for us, since our entrance into the workforce would coincide with the Baby Boom generation beginning to reach retirement age. I graduated from my undergraduate institution in 2008, right in the middle of the recession. Boomers weren't going anywhere. Their stocks and savings took a massive hit, so they needed the income from work. Furthermore, as a society, we're living healthier longer. Many members of my parents' generation simply don't want to retire. They like their work, and they're healthy and intellectually vigorous. Retirement right at age 65 would mean having to figure out what to do with the next 30 years, and I've found that many stay at work because they *want* to do so.

So, the previous generation wasn't retiring. I was interested in academic librarianship, but many universities had instituted hiring freezes for the duration of the financial crisis. Even when it ended, universities created fewer long-term new positions. The options for new applicants tended to be applying for short-term grant-funded positions, or waiting for current employees to retire or move on. Outside of academia, I heard friends and colleagues discuss how budgets and support for public and school libraries were being slashed drastically, if not eliminated outright.

The Boomers weren't retiring. Libraries weren't hiring much, if at all. The third leg of this tripod comes from the library schools themselves. The increase of virtual degree programs means that

schools are increasingly untethered from the physical limits of space. If you don't have to fit everyone into a classroom, you can make your classes as large as you want. To make matters worse, many have rolling admissions and graduation every semester. The library schools are flooding the job market with eager new graduates, all competing for a strictly limited number of positions.

I am nothing if not stubborn, and I believe I have a real aptitude for library and archives work, so I was determined to fight for my career. I pursued two parallel paths: I got creative with my work and I became involved with ALA.

Geography worked in my favor. I live in the heart of Silicon Valley, an area abounding with people who have the time and resources to invest heavily in their hobbies. Freelance work, therefore, was a solid option. I ended up with a few long-term clients, doing work ranging from family history research, to oral history, to cataloging a large music collection. It wasn't full-time, but some income and structure to my days made it easier to keep going during this period of extended underemployment, and freelancing offered some interesting opportunities to develop soft skills. I had to learn to be very clear about what I would and would not do: the work I did could, and sometimes did, drift into the realm of professional organizer or even personal assistant, which was a slippery slope that made me uncomfortable. The day a client asked me to take her car to the car wash was a real eye-opener, and I knew I had to be firmer about defining my role. Surrounded as I was by start-up culture and entrepreneurs, I knew that long-term self-employment didn't suit me, but it was enough to keep my hand in, and to build some interesting resume entries.

ALA involvement kept me going on an emotional level. As a former student chapter chair, I received emails early on about a new section within the Library Leadership and Management

Association (<http://www.ala.org/llama/communities/np>) that was specifically aimed at new members of the profession. Though not much of an entrepreneur myself, I do love a good *we-have-a-barn-let's-put-on-a-show* kind of project, and it looked like an interesting way to network with professional peers and those more established in the field. It also seemed like a good opportunity to test the borders of my comfort zone: taking on leadership roles always makes me feel nervous, but it's an anxiety I want to face head-on.

As a freelancer, attending ALA conferences was a business expense that could be written off my taxes, and the infusion of energy and confidence twice a year was truly invaluable. After my first ALA Annual Conference ended, I went back to my hotel room and cried, partly from sheer conference exhaustion, but also because for those four exhilarating days I truly felt like a member of the profession instead of a mere aspirant.

I have no solutions for the mess that is the job market. The Boomers will have to retire eventually, but it cannot be denied that the world of libraries, archives, and other information professions is changing. We are not a dying field, but for the time being, we don't seem to be a rapidly growing one either. Jobs are combined as employees move on to other opportunities, and the glut of new professionals graduating into the job market two or three times per year means that even part-time jobs get literally scores of applicants. All I can advise is to find a way to keep fighting. Get creative with your work, and take advantage of what's around you. Professional organizations like ALA can provide you with contacts, resources, and remarkable networks of professional and emotional support. Each one of us has to find their own combination of holding firm and flexibility. And as my mother likes to say, there's no way out but through.